

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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ICA-11 AID-05 IO-13 HA-05 TRSE-00 OMB-01 /100 W

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R 141330Z JUL 78

FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1841

INFO AMEMBASSY ALGEIRS

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TUNIS 5056

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR TS SHUM

SUBJ: CURRENT VIEWS OF TUNISIAN OPPOSITION LEADERS

1. SUMMARY: SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC LEADERS MESTIRI AND CAID-ES-SEBSI EXPRESSED OPTIMISM ON THIS GROUP'S ULTIMATE RECOGNITION AS AN OPOSITION PARTY AND INDICATED THEIR DEEP CONCERN FOR THE OREINTATION OF TUNISIAN YOUTH. PRO-US, THEY NEVERTHELESS REGRET THE HESISTANT, UNCOORDINATED US IMAGE TODAY. THEY LAUDED US CIVIL RIGHTS POLICY AND AGREED SOME PROGRESS IN CIVIL RIGHTS WAS BEING MADE HERE BUT THOUGH THERE WAS ROOM FOR MORE. END SUMMARY.

2. AHMED MESTIRI, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE MOVEMENT OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (MDS) AND BEJI CAID-ES-SEBSI, HIS LAWYER AND POLITICAL ALLY, CAME TO MY RESIDENCE FOR LUCH JULY 13 TO RENEW THEIR ACQUAINTANCE WITH FORMER AMBASSADOR CALHOUN WHO HAS RETURNED FOR A BRIEF VISIT TO TUNISIA. MUCH OF OUR CONVERSATION CONCERNED MESTIRI'S US VISIT LAST WINTER AND HIS STILL GLOWINGLY FAVORABLE IMPRESSIONS. OTHER VIEWS OF SPECIAL INTEREST WERE THE FOLLOWING:
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3. FUTURE OF MDS: I MENTIONED TO MESTIRI AND CAID-ES-SEBSI THAT I HAD HEARD MOST OF THE CABINET FAVORED PERMITTING THE MDS TO ORGANIZE ITSELF AS A FULL POLITICAL PARTY BUT THAT THERE WERE STILL SOME MINISTERS OPPOSED TO THE IDEA. MESTIRI AGREED THAT HIS INFORMATION PARALLELED MINE BUT ADDED THAT IT WAS SOME OF THE MORE INFLUENTIAL MINISTERS WHO OPPOSED

APPROVING THE MDS APPLICATION TO FUNCTION AS A POLITICAL PARTY. STILL, HE SAID, "A FRIEND WHO RETURNED TO TUNIS RECENTLY AFTER SPEAKING WITH THE PRESIDENT IN PARIS" HAD TOLD HIM THAT "THE PRESIDENT SEEMED TO BE COMING AROUND TO A FAVORABLE POSITION ON THE APPLICATION".

4. YOUTH PROBLEM: MESTIRI LAUNCHED INTO AN ELOQUENT EXPOSITION OF HIS GROUP'S PLANS TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS, ASPIRATIONS AND ORIENTATION OF TUNISIAN YOUTH. YOUNG PEOPLE, HE SAID, HAD TUNED OUT THE DESTOURIANS; THEY WERE BORED BY THEM. THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT THAT ATTRACT THEM ARE THOSE FOSTERED BY MARXISTS, BAATHISTS AND ALGERIANS, INFLUNECES WHICH HE LABELED "DESTABLIZING". I REMARKED THAT WHAT HE HAD JUST TOLD ME SOUNDED VERY MUCH LIKE LECTURES I HAD BEEN GIVEN ALREADY A FEW TIMES BY PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA. "IT IS NOT AGAINST SAYAH, NOUIRA AND PEOPLE LIKE THAT THAT WE ARE ORGANIZING, BUT AGAINST THESE UNHEALTHY INFLUENCES FROM ABROAD", HE REPLID. THE MDS LEADERSHIP IS STILL YOUNG ENOUGH TO RELATE TO TUNISIAN YOUTH, SAID MESTIRI, TO PROVIDE THEM WITH A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHICE, BUT IN TEN YEARS WE WILL BE TOO OLD; IT WILL BE TOO LATE. I SAID I THOUGHT IT ENCOURAGING THAT BOTH THE PSD AND THE MDS WERE INAGREEMENT THAT THERE IS A YOUTH PROBLEM IN TUNISIA. CAID-ES-SEBSI CLAIMED THAT THE PSD TALKED A LOT ABOUT IT BUT DID LITTLE TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM
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5. US POSITION: BOTH GUESTS MADE CLEAR THEIR PRO-WESTERN, PRO-US ORIENTATION, BUT BOTH DEPOLORED THE CURRENT US IMAGE OF WEAKNESS, HESITATION AND INDECISION. THEY FELT WE ARE WRONG IN STILL SUPPORTING SO MANY AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES (CITING CHILE, IRAN AND ZAIRE) AROUND THE WORLD. CAID-ES-SEBSI REGRETTED THAT WE HAD DONE NOTHING TO STOP THE COMMUNISTS FROM TAKING OVER ANGOLA AND HOPED WE WOULD CONTINUE TO GIVE MORE ATTENTION TO EVENTS IN AFRICA, NOT HOWEVER TO THE POINT OF MILITARY INTERVENTION. HE APPROVED OF OUR RECENT SHABA AIRLIFT. BOTH DECRIED THE SLOWNESS WITH WHICH THE US REACTS TO SOVIET PROVOCATIONS AND ASKED WHY THE US COULD NOT MAKE QUICK POLICY SWITCHES TO IT S OWN ADVANTAGE AS THE SOVIETS HAD DONE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA. I EXPLAINED.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 TUNIS 5056

6. US AND HUMAN RIGHTS: CAID-ES-SEBSI, SECONDED BY MESTIRI, GAVE GREAT PRAISE TO PRESIDENT CARTER'S CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS EVERYWHERE. THIS WAS OUR STRONGEST CARD, HE FELT, AND WE SHOULD CONTINUE OUR CAMPAIGN; IT WAS ONE WE COULD NOT LOSE. HOWEVER, SAID CAID-ES-SEBSI, WE SHOULD BE EVEN-HANDED IN ADVANCING THE CAUSE WITH OUR ENEMIES AS WELL AS WITH OUR FRIENDS. THEY WERE BOTH AFRAID THAT THEY HAD NOTICED SOME SLACKENING IN OUR ENTHUSIASM. I SAID I HAD NOT NOTICED A SLACKENING AND TOLD THEM THEY WOULD PROBABLY BE INTERESTED TO KNOW THAT ONE CONGRESSIONAL SUBCOMMITTEE CONSIDERING THE BUDGET COVEYING MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS HAD RECENTLY ADDED TUNISIA TO A LIST OF RECIPIENTS ABOUT WHOM VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS HAD BEEN ALLEGED. WE ARE EQUALLY CONSCIOUS OF THE SHORTCOMINGS OF OUR FIRENDS AS WELL AS OUR ENEINES, I STRESSED AND CITED OTHER EXAMPLES. I ASKED IF THEY IN PARTICULAR WOULD AGREE THAT TUNISIA HAD MADE SOME PROGRESS LATELY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS FIELD WITH THE APPEARANCE OF TWO OPPOSITION NEWSPAPERS (THE MDS'ER-RAI AND DEMOCRATIE) OVER THE PAST SIX MONTHS AND THE PROBABLE RECOGNITION OF THE MDS AS THE LOYAL OPPOSITION. THEY AGREED THAT THIS REPRESENTED
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PROGRESS, BUT MESTIRI SAID THEY STILL WILL SEEK FREER EXERCISE OF THE RIGHTS OF ASSEMBLY, EXPRESSION AND PRESS.

7. COMMENT: THIS TALK REPRESENTS CONTINUED CONFIRMATION THAT THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AS PRESENTLY CONSTITUTD ARE

JUST SLIGHTLY LEFT OF THE DESTOURIANS POLITICALLY AND
THAT THEIR DIFFERENCES WITH THE PSD ON FOREIGN POLICY ARE
ALMOST NON-EXISTENT. THEIR NEWSPAPERS WILL SHORTLY BEGIN
PUBLISHING THEIR ECONOMIC PLATFORM WHICH, WE EXPECT, WILL
NOT DIFFER VASTLY FROM WHAT TUNISIA HAS NOW, BUT WILL HAVE
A STRONGER EMPAHSIS ON "SOCIALISM" AND BE MORE CRITICAL
OF THE ABUSES OF FREE ENTERPRISE. IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT
BEJI CAID-ES-SEBSI DID NOT LEND HIS NAME TO THE LIST OF TOP
OFFICERS IN THE MSD ON ITS APPLICATION FOR ITS PERMIT TO
FUNCTION AS A POLITICAL PARTY, THAT HE HAD ONEOF HIS PERIODIC
AUDIENCES WITH PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA SHORTLY BEFORE THE
LATTER'S RECENT DEPARTURE FOR GENEVA AND PARIS AND THAT HE IS
GENERALLY BELIEVED TO DIFFER WITH MESTIRI OVER THE WISDOM
OF THE MDS DECLARING ITSELF A PARTY.
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